

AT THE POINT OF CAPRICORN

by Gene Wolfe

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The children crouched in a circle around the fire, looking skeptical and attentive as the old woman poked the embers. "It is true that the days have been getting shorter," she said. "But that is no reason to be afraid."

"I haven't been scared," the oldest boy announced, and he tossed the bone he had been sucking into the fire. The others stirred and looked at one another sidelong, for they had been afraid and knew that he had been too. The old bone cracked and popped in the heat like green wood.

"That shows how wise you have become by listening to my stories," the old woman said, and the oldest boy smiled, then frowned, for she said it so that it cut on every side, like the jagged ice he sometimes threw. A few snowflakes drifted through the mouth of the cave, and the smallest girl, who had been made to sit with her back to it, pulled her wolfskin more tightly about her.

"All the world comes here to the end of the world just to hear my stories," the old woman said, and the children nodded because they had heard her say that many times and knew it was true.

"That is so," the viking confirmed, and the children turned to look at him, for they had not seen him come in.

"Welcome, Knute's son," the old woman said softly.

The viking squatted behind the children, propping his chin on the haft of Legbiter, his sword. "Tell them, old woman," he grumbled. "Tell them why we kindle bonfires in winter to bring back the youth and life of Tyr Odinson the one-handed, who was stolen from us by the Frost Giants of Niflheim."

"That I will not," the old woman said, "since you yourself already have."

A lexicographer who had been listening at the mouth of the cave stepped inside, powdered with snow and looking very dusty. "*Bonfire* has nothing to do with all that," he said. "Such fires take their name from the bones that were burned in them at mid-winter."

Knuteson rose and slashed at him with Legbiter, catching him quite effectively just where the neck joins the shoulder.

The children moaned "Oooh!" in chorus, and the old woman spread her hands before the fire. "It does warm old bones," she said. "Tyr's or mine, and

that's a fact."

A pastry chef who had been watching from the back of the cave cleared his throat and twisted the left point of his small, black mustache. "Is it for that reason, Cher Madame, that we call him *le bon feu* — the good fire, how-you-say. May I inquire of you, since already I am so bold, how far are we here from the fine city of Paris, Texas? I there conduct Le Cafe de Paris, which per-haps has need *of me*."

"We are at the end of the world," the old woman said.

A druid entered, combing his white beard with long fingers. He was crowned with mistletoe. "It is now the winter solstice," he told the pastry chef, "When the Sun rises between Sacred Stones Fifty-Five and Fifty-Six. Though He has not done so yet. Quite an important date, really." He looked at Knuteson. "Would it bother anyone if I were to take this chap for a bit of a sacrifice?"

A professor of comparative religion who had entered with him declared, "It is firmly established that the Druids did not practice human sacrifice."

The druid murmured, "Quite so — we really don't *need* the practice now, do we? But it seems such a shame to waste him."

The oldest boy, who had been going through the lexicographer's pockets, told them, "He's already dead, I think."

"Very possibly," the druid admitted. "But since the Sun's still asleep, per-haps He won't notice. Take his ankles will you? There's a good little chap."

When they were gone, the youngest girl asked, "Where is the Sun? Is he really sleeping?"

"He has gone into the south," the old woman said, "following the birds. He will return when he sees the beautiful tree we have made —"

"Yggdrasil," Knuteson explained.

"— for he will know the birds will want to perch on its boughs." Then the old woman began to tell them that story.

The professor grunted. "Another so-lar myth. It is actually the inclination of the Earth, I believe."

Mother Gaea, one of whose mouths the cave was, rumbled, "It *is* my incli-nation, and don't you forget it," Several large stones dropped from the roof of the cave.

“Don’t make her talk any more,” the oldest remaining boy advised the pro-fessor.

Just at that moment, the first rays of the new-risen Sun streaked through the mouth of the cave. “It’s true!” the youngest girl piped to the old woman. “All the world comes to hear your sto-ries! The Sun has come too.”

“He always comes at this time of year,” the old woman said. “Still, the Sun comes not to hear my story, but to tell his own, here at the beginning of the world.